

# ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF CONTEMPORARY CENTRAL ASIA

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## Chapter 23

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### THE NATIONALISATION OF TRADITIONS

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# THE NATIONALISATION OF TRADITIONS

*Svetlana Jacquesson*

Traditions have been and still are a matter of never-ending debates between scholars who are defining and redefining tradition as a concept,<sup>1</sup> cultural elites who claim custody of traditions, politicians and policy makers who attempt to harness them, and the folks who carry them on. Long gone are the times when anyone could comfortably claim an authority over traditions. Any claim today – whether scholarly, political or folk – is open to debate.

Tradition stands for both the process of handing down and what is being handed down. Any skill, knowledge, belief or practice can be handed down and can thus be considered traditional. But if there is any agreement on tradition and traditional, it stops here. For some, the process of handing down has to do with face-to-face interactions and oral transmission. For others, neither face-to-face nor oral should define the process of transmission: written traditions are plentiful in Central Asia as elsewhere, not to mention the eruption of the new media of communication that emulate, modify or replace both the oral and the written. For some, traditions are handed down uninterrupted and faithfully from generation to generation, or from master to disciple; for others, traditions are continuously changing and may, from time to time, be in need of refurbishing. Some perceive traditions as disappearing and in need to be salvaged or revitalised, others believe in their resilience. There is also no consensus on the value of traditions: if for some traditions are the pillars of individual and collective identities, others perceive traditions as fusty, or conservative or oppressive.

All constituencies though seem to agree that traditional and modern are mutually defined, or that in order for the traditional to be meaningful as a quality there should be another quality – usually articulated as modern – to serve as a foil. This consensus might attest to the success of past Europe-born sociological theories of ‘great divides.’ It may also just remind us that social actors are cognitive misers, and dichotomies – no matter how much decried by scholars – help social actors get around and make sense of their worlds. What should not be overlooked somehow is that while the dichotomic relationship between traditional and modern remains widely used, the understandings or meanings of traditional and modern are constantly changing.

The sources that allow us to have an idea of how local actors reflect upon their own traditions are unequal. More sporadic or still less known, in the past, most of these reflections or discussions have taken place in relation to Islam and the various local manifestations of religiosity it could or could not accommodate (DeWeese 2016). In the present, since the dawn of independences, local talk on traditions is plentiful and the amount of publications in the national languages on

traditions, or customs or rituals is impressive. These publications take the shape of more or less elaborate inventories and more or less detailed descriptions of traditions in all walks of life, from the family to the nation; they foreground regional or local variations and ponder on their age or authenticity; they lament lost traditions or disappearing ones; or, they teach ordinary citizens how to perform them properly. Traditions, customs and rituals are abundantly discussed in the local news media as well as on social media, both approvingly and disapprovingly.

In the past as in the present, traditions in Central Asia have been abundantly described and discussed by outsiders. This written corpus stretches nearly uninterrupted as far back as the thirteenth century and includes, among others, travellers' accounts, a huge collection of colonial documents, the archives and ethnographies produced during the Soviet period and, last but not least, a robust body of scholarship created once the region became accessible to foreign scholars after the fall of the Soviet Union.

This chapter cannot offer but a snapshot of the past and present of traditions in Central Asia and of the ways they have been studied hitherto. It focuses on traditions as collective performances which symbolise the link between past and present generations. Ritual is central to performed traditions. By foregrounding performances, the chapter distinguishes traditions from a more diffuse process of cultural transmission of received opinions, of patterns of thought and behaviour. When traditions are performed, the sense of continuity with the past generations resides not in the attempt to repeat, reproduce or revive 'their traditions' but in the mere commitment to perform, and thus preserve. It is through performed traditions therefore that communities acquire and maintain a sense of social continuity and collective identity.

When traditions are distinguished from other processes of cultural transmission as being enacted or embodied, it is hardly a surprise that discourses on them are as plentiful as performances and communities. With the advent of nation-states, official regimes tend to lay hegemonic claims on discourses on traditions. Historians and sociologists emphasise that no matter how diverse its manifestations and meanings can be, modernity could certainly stand for this moment in history when for the first time a set of folk traditions may come to be selected and conceived of not only as being shared by an imagined community – the nation – but also as symbolising an ineffable 'national spirit' or 'national values' (Babadzan 2000). This instrumentalisation of traditions rarely happens unchallenged and the disagreement between officials and folk on the meaning and value of traditions is an outstanding feature of the contemporary world.

The chapter starts with a brief overview of the Soviet period as a key period when the relationship between nation, culture and identity was defined and when ordinary citizens in Central Asia developed various 'tactics' allowing them to maintain their commitment to local traditions without renouncing to the benefits offered by the socialist state. Next it describes how the official authorities of the newly independent states attempted to scrap the Soviet legacy and harness traditions in their attempts to nurture post-Soviet national subjectivities. The chapter then zooms in on life-cycle celebrations (Kyrgyz: *toy*; Uzbek: *to'y*; Tajik: *tūy*), in particular marriages and funerals, as a case that illustrates the rhetoric of current official condemnations of ritual excess. It analyses the latest laws and regulations on life-cycle celebrations as national traditions and the impact of the latter on ordinary citizens' practices and discourses. The chapter concludes by some observations on the ways in which the study of traditions in Central Asia contributes to the understanding of contemporary identity dilemmas and the frequent failures of the nation-state to accommodate them.

Though the study of contemporary Central Asia is an international field, this chapter foregrounds scholarly works in English as one of the leading languages in the field. This is not to deny the value of research on traditions published in other languages, those of Central Asia included. It is a consciously endorsed drawback for the sake of a coherent though limited intro-

duction to the study of traditions in the region. It is because of the personal expertise of the author and the geographical scope of recent research that Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are discussed in more detail than the rest of Central Asia.

### **Nation building without national traditions**

Scholars emphasise that both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union were challenged by Central Asia's 'uniqueness' and that in both the imperial and Soviet jargons 'uniqueness' rhymed with otherness and backwardness (Brower 2003; Campbell 2017). And while Tsarist Russia did undertake some 'civilising' actions in its colony, these actions appear as merely palliative when compared to the policies and practices of the Soviet Union. The latter acquiesced to otherness, less so to backwardness. The otherness was tamed by identifying, naming and describing languages and lifestyles, and organising their bearers into ethnically defined nations (Hirsch 2005; Reeves 2014). Each Soviet nation then was granted a 'homeland' or a state to which it was linked by a newly minted national history and where a national culture was produced in the national language by a set of modern institutions (Adams 2010; İgmen 2012).

As different from official national cultures, national traditions – in the sense of folk traditions that are recontextualised as symbols of the values or spirit of the new nations – seem to have had a very modest role in the design of Soviet republics. In Central Asia the only official holiday with a folk background seemed to have been Nowruz (Iranian/Islamic New Year) and its official recognition was achieved only in the 1970s after it was reshaped as Zoroastrian/pre-Islamic Spring Holiday (Kandiyoti 1996; Adams 2007). The landslide of newly introduced all-Union Soviet celebrations, or all-Union Soviet 'invented traditions',<sup>2</sup> sought to distract local actors from communal traditions and get them involved in the celebration or performance of new Soviet identities, communities and lifestyles (Binns 1980). As early as 1929 the Soviet regime introduced all-Union secular life-cycle ceremonies which did enjoy some popularity in Central Asia (Kamp 2007) though by the late Soviet period, the official rules and ceremonies in weddings and funerals were being overwhelmed by local rites and rituals (Jacquesson 2008; Roche and Hohmann 2011). Scholars emphasise that it is by comparison with and in opposition to the standardised Soviet ceremonies that life-cycle celebrations in the Central Asian republics were reinterpreted as 'ethnic' or 'national.' It is also during the late Soviet period that local elites started using the notion of national traditions to refer to Islamic observances (DeWeese 2002; Khalid 2007). While these claims seem to have been welcomed and endorsed by the public in large, it is worth underlying that the official category of national traditions remained empty throughout the Soviet period.

The Soviet regime viewed most local traditions as flagrant manifestations of backwardness and an obstacle to development (Hirsch 2005; Edgar 2006). Initially, accusations of subversion were heaped on 'class enemies' (religious and community leaders) who were scapegoated for acting as patrons of anti-Soviet behaviours and practices. Yet even after the large-scale purges of the 1930s, the adoption of modern socialist lifestyles proved far from smooth. In the next 50 years or so, Soviet policy makers and scholars would be kept busy by 'survivals,' or beliefs and practices that were 'relics' of the past. It can hardly be a coincidence that among the many survivals infesting Soviet life in Central Asia the so-called 'clan survivals' (Schatz 2004; Collins 2006) – the mutual rights and duties within extended kinship groups purportedly sharing the same ancestor in the male line – and 'religious survivals' (DeWeese 2012; Schoeberlein 2012) – local religious practices that did not fit into the Soviet vision of Islam as a religion – were among the most loathed and closely scrutinised. Both perpetuated the importance – and, somehow ironically, the survival – of identities and communities incompatible with the Soviet

ideology and both undermined the ongoing attempts to establish modern and secular Soviet nations.

Based on observations and fieldwork conducted after independence, most scholars agree that Soviet-style ‘modernisation’ in Central Asia was shallow. The region remained overwhelmingly agricultural and the canvas of local communal life was little affected by Soviet policies, notwithstanding the shock of collectivisation and the ensuing mass famine and exile. Moreover, the Soviet economy of shortages favoured the establishment of informal networks to facilitate the access to rare goods and services (Schatz 2004; Collins 2006). Being denied the right to claim private property and to accumulate it, local actors invested surplus income in lavish life-cycle celebrations and religious rituals in search of social recognition, moral satisfaction and spiritual fulfilment (Roche and Hohmann 2011; Trevisani 2016; Roberts 2017). Both networks of support and ritual networks were rooted in ‘traditional identities’ or ‘traditional communities’ that were kinship/clan or locality-based and helped the maintenance and reproduction of these identities and communities throughout the Soviet period. Based on evidence from different periods and different regions of Central Asia, scholars foreground the capacity of local actors to customise Soviet institutions – i.e., to subvert these institutions and make them serve local communal purposes (Roy 2000; Roberts 2017; cf. Beyer 2016) – and nurture layered identities or multiples subjectivities (Kandiyoti 1996; Phillips and James 2001; Sartori 2010; 2019) empowering them to move smoothly between Soviet, ethnic, religious, and subethnic registers. Soviet rule though did not go unnoticed. Scholars have consistently argued that it is through Soviet narratives that the ‘naturalness’ of the nation as the supreme expression of ethnic identity as well as the notion of ethnicity itself took sure hold of the minds of many Central Asians, and especially of those who belonged to the urbanised elites and the *nomenklatura* (DeWeese 2002).

### **Traditionalising the post-Soviet nations**

At independence, the new regimes never questioned the distinctiveness and uniqueness – or ‘cultural authenticity’ (Rasanayagam 2011) – of the Soviet-cum-independent nations. Instead they deployed efforts to explain them and make sure that they are preserved for the future generations by being codified in state ideologies. In the process, however, the now-sovereign nations were scaled down to the so-called ‘titular ethnic majorities’ and large swaths of ‘non-titular’ citizens turned away from the pathos of independence. This is what happened in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, for example. Notwithstanding the fact that long-lived president Islam Karimov (1991–2016) was scorned for his authoritarianism while president Askar Akayev (1991–2005) was hailed as a beacon of democracy, both of them made ample use of ‘ancient’ national culture borne by ‘ancestral’ traditions to explain the uniqueness of their nations and charter the future. President Askar Akayev never tired of claiming that Kyrgyz history spanned thousands of years and was embodied in a long line of ancestors whose legacy comprised ‘the most precious of precious relics,’ the Manas epic (Akayev 2002). He described the epic successively as ‘a bearer of the national idea,’ ‘a prototype of the national constitution,’ and ‘a social genome’ containing ‘the genetic pool of national identity, national spirit and national culture’ (Akayev 2003). Since the Manas epic as ‘the most precious of precious relics’ was both the creation and the legacy of the ancestors, the traditions and values purportedly contained in it were not only the genuine Kyrgyz traditions and values but every Kyrgyz – by the virtue of having Kyrgyz ancestors – had these traditions and values in ‘the blood and flesh’ (Akayev 2002).

Islam Karimov’s office as a president was much longer than Akayev’s. Scholars have emphasised that not only Karimov was exceptionally diligent in laying the foundations of an Uzbek national ideology but that he kept perfecting it throughout his career (Kurzman 1999; March

2003). In the early 2000s, Karimov's attention was also focused on 'the values' of the Uzbek nation. At that time, he equated these values with 'traditions and customs that have been formed over the millennia.' Like Akaev, he praised the ancestors for begetting 'noble values' and 'worthy traditions' and invited contemporary Uzbeks to preserve them as 'a precious wealth' for the future generations. The Uzbeks, Karimov noted, did not have a 'written record' of these values and traditions though, exactly like the Kyrgyz, every Uzbek recognises and respects them because they have been absorbed by Uzbek 'blood and flesh' (Karimov 2002).

Central Asians then entered the independence period with their leaders loudly assuring them that each nation or each state 'bears' an ethnic distinctiveness. By praising the ancestors as state builders and nation begetters both presidents transformed the somehow anonymous historical continuity of Soviet-style national histories into an ethnic continuity that was embodied by these ancestors. Several scholars (March 2003; Gullette 2010) have insightfully emphasised that by locating the nation and its values in the ancestors and their traditions, the new regimes attempted to deploy a new type of post-Soviet neo-traditional governmentality whereby ordinary citizens would identify with the glorious national heritage and self-discipline so as to preserve and transmit it to the future generations.

### **Problematising traditions**

The official attempts to traditionalise the nation and the rhetoric of national ideologies may leave the wrong impression that with independence Central Asian citizens became estranged from their traditions. This is not what scholars discovered in the field that opened for investigations at that time. Just on the contrary: the commitment to traditions by social actors who have struggled with the transition from centralised socialist to market-driven systems and who kept navigating in domestic economies mined by inflation, unemployment and corruption drew the attention of scholars right away and has remained on their research agenda ever since. Among many a commitments, weddings and funerals stood out because of the extended social networks involved in their preparation and celebration and their ritualised feasting and gift exchange. Scholars have documented how these social networks from being localised have become translocal, spanning the urban-rural divide and, since the early 2000s, transnational, connecting labour migrants abroad to their home communities (Werner 1998; Reeves 2012; Ilkhamov 2013). They have noted the growing amount of expenditures on life-cycle celebrations and emphasised that while local inflation rates were not to be ignored, these expenditures were also incurred by new consumption patterns: food and fabric as ceremonial gifts have been replaced by bundles of flat bread, carpets, coats and banknotes; festive meals – based on meat, rice or dough – are being embellished with salads and pickles, confectionary from all over the world, homemade and manufactured pastries, huge wedding cakes, and elaborate displays of exotic fruit; from houses and courtyards the parties have moved to cafes, restaurants or especially built 'feastaurants' (*toykana*) capable of seating up to 2,000 persons, lavishly decorated and fitted out with the latest sound equipment and lighting systems; the wedding corteges have seen limousines, Range Rovers and Geländewagens replace Volgas, Moskviches and Zhigulis. Suffice it to add here that in the otherwise bleak domestic economies, the so-called 'toy economy' – or the production and consumption of goods and services related to life-cycle celebrations (Werner 2000; Trevisani 2016; Turdalieva and Provis 2017) – may be one of the few sure indicators of Central Asia's successful transition to the market economy.

New patterns of economic activities and consumption, scholars conclude, have been 'customised' and are used to sustain gifting and feasting that are understood and problematised by local actors as traditional or traditions (Werner 2000; Reeves 2012; Ilkhamov 2013). All scholars

also note that those who hold weddings and funerals strive to a 'proper way' of conducting them and some studies explore the complex family strategies of consumption and accumulations or the hardships families face in their attempts to sustain the tradition and meet the expectations of kith and kin (Abashin 2003; Light 2015; Botoeva 2015; Trevisani 2016; Beyer 2016).

One could have expected that such a commitment to tradition and community would have fallen straight to the point of the neo-traditionalist aspirations of the new regimes and would have been welcomed by them. Instead, it drew their ire. As early as October 1998, Islam Karimov publicly expressed his disapproval of how citizens were holding life-cycle celebrations. At that time Karimov penned down a decree in which he claimed that these celebrations were infested by 'survivals of the past' such as profligacy, vanity, and extravagance. In their current manifestations, Karimov continued, life-cycle celebrations were an affront to 'folk customs and traditions.' He blamed 'arrogant officials' for 'unseemly behaviour' that hurts the self-esteem of ordinary citizens and undermines the faith of the latter in justice and in the authority of the state. In this very first decree, Karimov condemned in particular the 'lavish holding of events dedicated to the memory of the deceased' and claimed that current commemorations 'distort the national customs left to the Uzbeks by their ancestors and profane Uzbek sacred traditions.'<sup>3</sup> The ordinary people, according to Karimov, were not only revolted by such excess but also required that surplus income be used – 'according to ancient customs' – for charity (Karimov 1998 as quoted in Abashin 2003). Four years later, in 2002, Karimov restated that both 'modern traditions' and 'backward rites' damaged 'the centuries-old values of the nation and people.' He also specified that by 'modern traditions' and 'backward rites' he was referring to 'the misdemeanours that are increasingly invading life under the guise of traditions and customs and turning weddings and ceremonies into lavish celebrations and feasts' (Karimov 2002).

Karimov's argumentation has been repeated, borrowed, rehearsed and adapted ever since the early 2000s. Thus, in May 2007, while criticising expenditures on weddings and funerals, Tajikistan's president Emomali Rahmon mocked the amount of wedding rituals, described them as 'unnecessary and unaffordable' and blamed government officials, businesspeople and religious figures for 'showing off their wealth' and giving a bad example to those who have only modest incomes (Farangis 2007). And in March 2010, in his last public speech, Kyrgyzstan's president Kurmanbek Bakiyev acknowledged that large funerals and weddings are Kyrgyz traditions – 'without which the Kyrgyz would not be Kyrgyz' – but also argued that 'rites and rituals that entail unjustified and even inconceivable expenses' lack 'relevance' in the twenty-first century. Though indirectly, Bakiyev too accused state and government officials for spoiling the 'national values' and invited them to practice modesty and prudence (Bakiyev 2010).

Similar condemnations – using the rhetoric of excess, subsuming both elaborate rituals and high expenditures – have a long history in Central Asia (DeWeese 2012 2016). They are relatively well documented during the tide of local reformist projects in the last years of the Russian empire and the first decade of the Soviet period, and throughout the latter (Abashin 2003; Khalid 2007; Jacquesson 2008; Roberts 2017). From one period to another, 'excess' has been framed either as wrong from a religious point of view or as incompatible with ever-evolving notions of 'modernity,' 'development,' 'progress' or 'justice.' In the independence period, however, official criticisms hammer home the damage that 'excess' brings to 'ancient customs,' 'sacred traditions,' and 'national values.' When excess is scorned as a survival, it is a survival from the Soviet period, under the guise of bad Soviet habits. Though excess can still be framed as an obstacle to development, as in the 2005 statement of Kyrgyzstan's president Bakiyev, it is as regularly denounced as a corollary of development, i.e. post-Soviet economic liberalisation and growing consumerism, as in the 2002 argumentation of Karimov. In both cases, in a willing or unwilling repetition of the early Soviet argumentation, local elites – state and government

officials, politicians, businesspeople, and religious figures – are either scapegoated as carriers of Soviet survivals or as patrons of alien consumerist habits. Ordinary citizens instead are depicted either as being misled in their understanding of authentic ancestral customs and traditions, or as outright suffering from the distortion of these customs and traditions. Since neither edifying discourses nor elaborate national ideologies seemed to have the desired effect, either on the elites or on the folk, it is by state regulations that the new regimes decided to strip the ancestral traditions of Soviet and other modern accretions, turn them into truly national ones and, by the same move, protect the ordinary citizens against ritual excess.

### **Nationalising traditions**

Twenty-one years after the 1998 decree of Karimov, in September 2019, the parliament of Uzbekistan approved a new bill ‘On further improving the regulations of weddings, family events,<sup>4</sup> funerals, and commemorations of the dead’ (Senat Olij Mazhlisa Respubliki Uzbekistan 2019; Xalq so’zi 2019). During the same span of time, in 2007, Tajikistan’s parliament, upon the order of the president, adopted a law on ‘The regulations of traditions, celebrations, and rituals’ (Prezident respubliki Tadjikistan E. Rahmonov 2007) while Kyrgyzstan’s MPs drafted several similar laws – in 2002–2011 (Zhogorku Kengesh Kyrgyzskoi respublike 2011) and 2016 (Zhogorku Kengesh Kyrgyzskoi respublike 2016) – but failed to have them voted.<sup>5</sup>

These regulations are extremely meticulous in sorting out the ‘excessive’ from the ‘ancient,’ the ‘sacred’ and the ‘national’ in contemporary practices. In the case of weddings,<sup>6</sup> for example, the 2011 Tajikistan law discusses the wedding feast – for which the number of guests is capped at 200 – as well as 18 other rituals preceding or following the feast. It bans no less than 16 of these rituals, among them the celebration of the betrothal; the pilaf meal offered to the men of the neighbourhood ahead of the wedding; the gathering upon the reception by the bride of the chests of gifts from the bridegroom’s family; the gatherings upon the display of the bride’s and bridegroom’s wedding outfits; the meal offered during the first visit of the bride’s parents to their in-laws; and the welcoming meals for the bride when she first visits the relatives of the bridegroom. Two other rituals – the first visit of the bride’s family by the bridegroom and the welcoming party for the bride by the bridegroom’s family – are allowed only if held ‘in a family circle,’ i.e. with the number of guests capped at 15. Regarding funerals, the Tajikistan law mentions 10 rituals and bans as ‘extra’ or ‘superfluous’ the offering of food or the slaughter of animals for 9 among them and, most notably, for the commemorations of the third and fortieth days, and the year of the death.

The 2011 Kyrgyzstan draft law is in many ways a reversed version of the 2007 Tajikistan law. Its section on weddings is as concise as the Tajik section on funerals: it only notes that it is forbidden to exchange clothes as gifts during the wedding celebrations, that the wedding feast should not be attended by more than 200 guests, and that the rituals following the wedding must be conducted ‘in a family circle’ and attended by no more than 15 people.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to the regulation of funerals, the Kyrgyzstan draft law is as detailed and as severe as the Tajikistan law in the case of weddings.<sup>8</sup> It bans 10 rituals or customs: the slaughtering of livestock by the household of the deceased in the three days following the death; the giving out of the personal belongings of the deceased; the wearing of mourning; the sacrifices to the soul of the deceased; the handing out of memory gifts; the ritual lamentation of women; the ritual lamentation of men; the use of a crook while performing the latter; the erection of a graveyard monument; and the offering and drinking of alcohol. The draft law puts restrictions – without offering food – on another four rituals: the commemorations of the third, seventh and fortieth days of the death and the prayers for the deceased on Thursdays. It offers a reformed rite for the commemoration



of the year of the death: an attendance limited to 70 people, the sacrifice of a sheep or a goat, and the reading of the Koran.<sup>9</sup>

Official regulations claim to reduce ‘unnecessary expenses’ and, at the same time, ‘protect national culture and folk traditions’ (2007 Tajikistan law) or ‘strengthen the adherence to authentic national values and the respect for folk traditions’ (2011 Kyrgyzstan draft law). In the spirit of the official ideologies in which authentic national culture and folk traditions are begotten by the ancestors and thus located in the past, these regulations spare some rituals as symbols of the claimed historical continuity of the nation and its traditions but severely cut gifting and feasting practices as the basis for the social reproduction of local communities or ritual networks. It is not too far-fetched to suggest that beyond their official rhetoric these regulations seek to undermine any community other than the nation and any identity other than the national, in particular the so-called ‘traditional identities’ based on kinship or locality. Though some scholars suggest that these official attempts to nationalise life-cycle celebrations may signal the birth of ritual nationalisms in Central Asia – when social actors are uprooted from their local communities not by industrialisation but by the instrumentalisation of rituals’ capacity to create feelings of belonging and loyalty – it is also worth emphasising that, for all practical reasons, once stripped of ritual excess, national values as embodied in the reformed celebrations become undistinguishable from strict Islamic precepts.

## **Conclusion**

Some of these regulations are recent, and they still await investigations. Depending on the period and the country, the existing analyses assess their impact very differently. In Tajikistan, due to the traumas of the civil war (1992–1997) and the commitment to ‘harmony’ endorsed by both authorities and citizens, official regulations are either welcomed – because of the opportunity they offer to marry at a small expense – or circumvented, by bribing local authorities or by informalising (conducting secretly) some of the gifting and feasting practices. Scholars claim that in its present shape the law impacts only the ‘public performances’ of weddings (by capping the number of participants in the wedding feast and, in subsequent regulations, defining the days, durations and places where it can be held) while leaving their ‘cultural performances’ (the customs and rituals outside of the wedding feast) unaffected, because of the subversive tactics developed by social actors or because of the state’s incapacity to enforce its own laws (Roche and Hohmann 2011). These ‘cultural performances’ offer various local enactments of the proper Tajik wedding, from gatherings celebrating ostentatious gifting and conspicuous consumption made possible by labour migrants’ remittances to feasting- and gifting-free religious marriages where ritual excess is brought about by local mullahs who not only check ‘every single ritual’ for compliance with Islam but also introduce new ones claimed to date back to pre-Soviet times, ‘when people were ‘good Muslims’’ (ibid.). In Tajikistan, ritual nationalism in an Islamic guise seems to be least resisted and broadly endorsed with ‘traditional’ being most often applied to religious wedding celebration while ‘modern’ refers to ‘a consumerist feast in which status is displayed through wealth’ (ibid.).

To stay within the wedding atmosphere, in Uzbekistan, past and recent official regulations – very similar in content and shape to the 2007 Tajikistan law discussed in the previous section – have led to an ‘inequality in ritual’ (Trevisani 2016) with those at the upper end patronising a prospering ceremonial economy and holding ‘modern’ marriages while those at the lower end are exposed to the zeal and whims of state-appointed neighbourhood committees that decide on the size and style of the celebration. On the one hand, these regulations have not put an end to ostentatious spending and conspicuous consumption which, contrary to the claims of

the president, are not perceived as ‘Soviet survivals’ but as sure tokens of being ‘modern.’ On the other hand, recent regulations, coupled with a rampant inflation, have occasioned what many social actors perceive as a ‘loss in ritual wealth’ or ‘traditions rotting from inside’ (ibid.). So much so, that after more than 20 years of fighting excess, the official authorities have eventually taken up the duty to protect the traditions themselves: in 2018, the city state administration of the capital Tashkent started offering ready-made ‘scenarios’ for weddings that are modest but also nationally traditional (Orlova 2019).

In Kyrgyzstan, as mentioned above, the government and parliament have been unable to impose any regulation or law on life-cycle celebrations. The religious authorities have nevertheless been issuing regular *fatwas* (non-binding religious opinions) on the proper funeral rite for Muslims. In some places, local state administrations, with or without collaboration with local religious authorities, have introduced village charters that curtail the expenditures on life-cycle rituals. Elsewhere, decisions at the local level have been more drastic and a ban on funerary feasts has been implemented. Yet, Kyrgyzstan is also the only Central Asian country where a real counter-offensive to defend local funerary rites as pillars of Kyrgyz ethnic-national identity has been launched. In a nutshell, local state regulations, as well as the three draft laws that have been offered to the attention of the public, pigeonhole funeral rituals as ‘allowed’ and ‘banned’ in the same way as the religious *fatwas* divide them into ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ from the standpoint of a rigid Islamic norm (Jacquesson 2008; Beyer 2016; Pembeci 2017). Cultural elite figures as well as ordinary Kyrgyz in many places argue that official attempts to reform the funeral rite are jeopardising the ethnic and national traditions of the Kyrgyz and opening the way to the ‘Arabisation’ of the state. Being a ‘bad’ Muslim when conducting the funeral rite has been promoted by places into an ancestral Kyrgyz national tradition (Pembeci 2017).

In contemporary Central Asia then, both official regimes and ordinary citizens seem well established in their understandings of what traditions are and why they matter.<sup>10</sup> On the one side, official regimes still attempt to promote national identity as both the most ancient and the most modern form of belonging and instrumentalise traditions – unfailingly represented as ancient and ancestral – not only as the ultimate expression of national identity but also as the only way to authenticate it. The regimes themselves build their legitimacy as the custodians of these ancient national traditions and as the ultimate authorities over their authenticity or spuriousness. Traditions are thus not only the connection to glorious national pasts but, as importantly, a connection that can be claimed only if traditions remain authentic. However, as already noticed above, in all three countries the officially reformed wedding and funerary traditions are universally Islamic rather than distinctively national.

On the other side, for rank and file citizens, marriage and funeral celebrations are traditional not because of their conformity to ancient or ancestral models but because they have been held before or, to put it differently, because it is a tradition to hold them, and to hold them ‘properly.’ Yet the ‘properly’ in folk talk have a meaning quite different from the ‘properly’ in official talk or from the ‘proper ways’ imposed by laws and regulations. The folk does not define ‘proper’ by a ritual template that is supposedly ancient and ancestral, or right by Islam. The folk ‘proper’ is contingent on both private – individual and family – aspirations and public or community expectations, or the expectations of these same extended social networks that make life-cycle celebrations in the region so outstanding. As different from the historical continuity so valorised in official discourses, social actors are then concerned with social continuity, or with being recognised by and integrated within a community, or a ritual or social network. These networks have remained vital in the post-Soviet context for social, economic, and political support. They have been reconfigured to fit or, more rarely, cross the social boundaries occasioned by the end of the centralised socialist economies. Different communities or networks nurture

and nourish different lifestyles, different imaginations, and different expectations. Currently, therefore, it can be a tradition to hold extravagant marriages or, on the opposite, modest ones, secular ones or, on the opposite, religious ones. It can even be a tradition to be a good Muslim or a bad one.

By their very nature of being official, recent regulations not only oblige citizens to adopt a position – either approving or disapproving – but they also equate loyalty to the nation and its values with compliance to easily controlled rules. As such these regulations and the categories produced or reproduced in them – allowed, banned, ethnic, national, modern, backward, authentic, spurious, wasteful, modest – either promote or stigmatise lifestyles and life choices and make more conflict-ridden the complex articulations of subjectivities and identities in contemporary Central Asia.

### Notes

- 1 Even the titles of scholarly discussions contemporaneous with or following the magisterial work of Shils (1981) are revealing, i.e. Eugenia Shanklin (1981) 'Two meanings and uses of traditions,' Dan Ben-Amos (1984) 'The Seven strands of tradition: varieties in its meaning in American folklore studies' or Dorothy Noyes (2009) 'Tradition: three traditions.'
- 2 This chapter follows the suggestion of Hizky Shoham (2011) that modern invented traditions can be distinguished from folk traditions by the different modes of temporality they espouse: while folk traditions create a sense of continuity with the past, invented traditions are openly future-oriented to the extent that their inventors hope them to continue well into the future. Henceforth, invented traditions are overwhelmingly linked to official calendars and what Shoham calls 'quantitative chronology' (jubilees, anniversaries etc.) and they depend on repetition rather than transmission.
- 3 On Uzbek funerary rites, see Dağyeli 2015.
- 4 'Family events' are mentioned in all three regulations discussed in this section and they include circumcisions and birthday parties.
- 5 By 'celebrations' Tajikistan's and Kyrgyzstan's regulations refer to the newly established national holidays. In both cases, the latter have to be held 'in compliance with the existing laws.'
- 6 Tajik wedding rituals are described in Roche and Hohmann 2011; on Uzbek wedding rituals, see Trevisani 2016.
- 7 On Kyrgyz weddings, see McBrien 2017; Turdalieva and Provis 2017.
- 8 On Kyrgyz funerary rites, see Hardenberg 2010; Beyer 2016.
- 9 On the importance of this commemoration, see Jacquesson 2008; 2013.
- 10 For further examples of traditionalisation 'from below,' see Beyer and Finke 2019.

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